

Women and Media in China Post-1995

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China has undergone rapid transformations in the decade since 1995. To what extent have these changes affected perceptions of women in society? How have the mass media reflected calls for more sensitivity to gender issues? What are the challenges that remain?

According to the Statistical Communiqué of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on National Economic and Social Development, at the end of 2004 there were 282 radio broadcasting stations, 314 television stations and 60 educational television stations throughout China. Subscribers to cable television programmes reached 114.7 million. Digital cable television covered 30 cities in China with 1.22 million subscribers. Radio broadcasting coverage was 94.1% and television broadcasting coverage was 95.3%.

A total of 25.77 billion copies of national and provincial newspapers and 2.69 billion copies of magazines was issued, and 6.44 billion copies of books published. Ten years earlier in April 1994 the Internet service began to serve the public in China. According to surveys conducted by the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC), the number of Internet users increased from 620,000 in 1997 to 79,500,000 in 2004, 128 times that of 1997.

It should be noted that not everybody has the same access to mass media, ICTs and Internet in China. 95.3% television broadcasting coverage rate means that there are about 60 million people do not have access to TV. Qualitative surveys found that some rural people don't read print media, because they have no money to buy or enough literacy to read.² According to the Statistical Communiqué for 2004 that year saw 49.7 million new telephone subscribers to bring the total number to 312.44 million by the end of the year. This included 210.85 million urban subscribers and 101.59 million rural subscribers, despite the fact that the rural population accounts for 63.78% of the total population.³

There has been a tremendous development in the adoption of Internet in China in the past decade, but only 6% of the total population, that is 6% of 1.3 billion, has access to the Internet. Moreover, most media are produced in urban areas by urban people and for urban people. There is much less chance of identifying and discussing rural people's needs for media and information.

Before 1995

Information strata have been identified not only in urban-rural gaps, but also in gender issues, as follows.

Women in decision-making groups. In 1994 a national survey of female news workers showed that women made up 4.4% of personnel at the highest decision-making levels (editor-in chief, deputy editor-in-chief, chief of staff) and 9.6% at mid-level.⁴

Media for women. Of the thirty-two central, provincial and municipal televisions stations, only seven, or 22%, had established programmes specifically for women as of October 1998. A small number of media outlets exist for Chinese women. According to statistics in 1996 there were 42 women's magazines and four newspapers in China, compared with more than 8,000 magazines and 2,000 newspapers. Only one magazine is targeted at rural women, that is Rural Women Knowing Everything, sponsored by China Women's News of the All-China Women's Federation.⁵

Media contents. Because most media workers have not learned gender issues in their universities or work places, it is very possible that media disseminated information of stereotypes and gender discrimination against women. Some articles criticized the gender discrimination in advertisements published by China Women's News before 1995. But we have do not any studies before 1996.⁶

Women as audience. Research institutions and the news media have conducted hundreds of audience surveys since 1982. Almost every survey includes the female audience. However, the needs of women as audience have not studied in publishing reports. Most survey researchers took women as consumers of media rather than as users and initiators of media. Also we have not found any studies about how much China's media is targeted at rural women, the types of media needed by rural women, how much of the information in the media satisfies the needs of rural women, or how much space the media provide for rural women to express themselves.⁷

Progress 1996-2005

In 2000 the China government announced the National Programme for the Development of Chinese Women (2001-10). It is the first time that the following requirements were written into the national programme:

Develop gender-sensitive cultural and media policies.

Create more conditions and opportunities for women to get involved in the press and in the field of publicity, with a view to promoting women's extensive participation in the management and programming of, education and training in and research into, publicity media

Endeavour to increase women's share of publicity media resources.

Strengthen the gender awareness of society, gradually eliminate prejudice, discrimination and depreciatory perceptions against women, and create a favourable social environment for women's development.

Make known to the general public the role and achievements of women in economic development and social progress through the press and publishing, radio, film and TV, and literature and arts, with emphasis on outstanding model women.

Intensify management of the cultural market, and allow neither pornography nor any product that tarnishes the personal dignity of women in publicity media, advertisements, literature and arts.

The government recognized and supported women's organizations call for advocating gender equality in mass media. Some officials from government departments related to media, and the major state-owned press has participated in symposiums and training on gender awareness initiated by women organizations.

Promoting gender issues

Since 1995 the China government has started the programme for women Half of the Sky on CCTV, worked with China Women's News (magazine Rural Women Knowing Everything, Rural Girls in Cities and other women's magazines and newspapers (sponsored by local women's federations) to disseminate information on gender issues.

In some provinces and regions, women's federations have had the opportunity to cooperate with local TV stations to prepare regular programmes for women. Some new media such as websites 'Anti-Domestic Violence Against Women', and 'Media Watch', initiated by women's NGOs, have provided new channels for women to express their voices.

The mass media also discussed the problems encountered by women during this period of social transformation, such as issues of re-employment for laid-off women workers, young migrant women, land rights of rural women, high sex ratio at birth, girl children and others. More gender-sensitive issues such as domestic violence against women, date rape and sexual harassment have been reported in the media. Protecting the basic rights and interests of women in accordance with the law has also been taken up by the media.

In 1996, Capital Female Reporters Association launched Media Watch, which monitors and consults with the media to ensure that women's needs and concerns are properly reflected. Since then Media Watch has conducted gender training for many media people in most provinces, published many articles criticizing discrimination against women in the media, in order to promote balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media.

Media studies related to gender issues have been increasing and since 1996 at least three books were published in China. These media studies focused on content analysis of media texts and action researches. Effects research is still a blank waiting to be filled up.

In 1997-98, a gender training group was established with the support of UNDP. This group developed the first training manual and conducted some TOT workshops. After that the group became a facilitators' group, sponsored by Oxfam Hong Kong. Some international organizations, UN agencies, and popular women's organizations invited some members from the facilitators' group to conduct participatory training on gender for media people.

Recently a training manual on media and domestic violence issue has been published in China, and two sets of self-discipline rules have been produced by journalists on the basis of gender training workshops. One is Guidelines for Violence Against Women Issues in the Media, and the other is Understanding Girls' Issues – Guide for Media.

Grassroots women's organizations encourage village women to develop, in appropriate languages, traditional, indigenous and other ethnic forms of media, such as story-telling, drama and others reflecting their cultures, and to utilize these forms of communication to disseminate information about domestic violence, women and development issues. Women's organizations have cooperated with local mass media and represented village women's drama on TV.

Problems and actions be taken

Gender awareness has not been incorporated into the mainstream of media policies. Government administrative organizations controlling the media, and decision-makers and practitioners in the media lack gender awareness, and cannot do gender analysis of current media policies.

Since 1995, there has been not a significant change in women entering decision-making groups in the media, especially state-owned mainstream media. The government should support women's education, training and employment to promote and ensure women's equal access to all areas and levels of the media.

Women's media resources are not large in number. Women in rural areas and in poor areas have little access to media resources. The government and non-government organizations need to take action to develop special policies for promoting the use of media and the development of alternative media for vulnerable women groups.

Mass media reporting of women's issues and campaigns is inadequate. Some gender discrimination and outdated stereotypes of women still exist, even in programmes for women. It is difficult for news stories about women's poverty, health, employment, gender equality, or violence against women to appear as important news on the first or second pages.

Popular women's organizations, women movements and marginalized women are seldom reflected in the mainstream media. The creation and use of non-stereotyped, balanced and diverse images of women in the media should be encouraged by government and mass media.

Research on media and women is still weak in communication fields in China. Gender issues are not a key research issue and are not funded. Actions taken should support research into all aspects of women and the media so as to define areas needing attention and action and to review existing media policies with the aim of integrating a gender perspective.

Gender training for media professionals has been conducted by women's NGOs such as Media Watch and the Facilitator Group, but there has been lack of government support. Gender-sensitive training for media professionals should be legitimized in media departments of universities. Encouraging gender-sensitive training for media owners and managers, and developing courses in universities and media literacy should be the next key actions.

In the information age, training women to make greater use of information technology is one of the important challenges for women's expression and participation in society. Not much media

training has been done, especially at the international level. One crucial step for the future will be training women and women's NGOs to make use of ICTs and to develop alternative media.

Notes

1. Please refer to CNNIC's website: <http://www.cnnic.net.cn/>
2. Some qualitative reports about rural people' use of media by Bu Wei, Jack Qiu Linchuan and Liu Xiaohong. Sponsored by UNICEF, unpublished.
3. Compiled by the State Statistics Bureau of PRC, China Statistics Almanac 2001, China Statistics Publisher, September, 2001, p. 101.
4. Bu Wei, Media and Gender, (2001), Jiangsu Renmin Publishing House, p.101-123.
5. Bu Wei, Chinese Women and the Mass Media: Status Quo, Interventions, and Challenges, Holding Up Half the Sky: Chinese Women Past, Present, and Future, (2004), Edited by Tao Jie, Zheng Bijun, and Shirley L. Mow, p.278-279. The Feminist Press, U.S, New York
6. Bu Wei, Review Report on Gender and the Media Studies, (2004), Almanac of Chinese Women's Studies (1996-2000), edited by the Institute of Women Studies of All-China Women's Federation, p.171.
7. Bu Wei, Chinese Women and the Mass Media: Status Quo, Interventions, and Challenges, Holding Up Half the Sky: Chinese Women Past, Present, and Future, (2004), Edited by Tao Jie, Zheng Bijun, and Shirley L. Mow, p.281-283. The Feminist Press, U.S, New York.

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